Pabirčiti (or pabirčenje) (Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Diković, Jovana

Abstract: Alena Ledeneva invites you on a voyage of discovery to explore society's open secrets, unwritten rules and know-how practices. Broadly defined as 'ways of getting things done', these invisible yet powerful informal practices tend to escape articulation in official discourse. They include emotion-driven exchanges of gifts or favours and tributes for services, interest-driven know-how (from informal welfare to informal employment and entrepreneurship), identity-driven practices of solidarity, and power-driven forms of co-optation and control. The paradox, or not, of the invisibility of these informal practices is their ubiquity. Expertly practised by insiders but often hidden from outsiders, informal practices are, as this book shows, deeply rooted all over the world, yet underestimated in policy. Entries from the five continents presented in this volume are samples of the truly global and ever-growing collection, made possible by a remarkable collaboration of over 200 scholars across disciplines and area studies. By mapping the grey zones, blurred boundaries, types of ambivalence and contexts of complexity, this book creates the first Global Map of Informality. The accompanying database (www.in-formality.com) is searchable by region, keyword or type of practice, so do explore what works, how, where and why!

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constitutes 'authentic' dacha life has never really ceased. In the nineteenth century, the more austere commentators focused on the health-giving properties of the *dacha* (which were very real, given the dreadful sanitation in Russia's cities) without setting much store by the more frivolous pastimes of the *dachniki*; other stakeholders in the *dacha* experience were more interested in entertaining guests and playing games. Pre-revolutionary Russians did not, however, make the connection between *dachas* and subsistence, seeing out-of-town living as restorative and/or recreational. In Soviet times, the intelligentsia model of *dacha* as recuperation for overtaxed urban minds coexisted with the peasant-infused garden plot model. In the post-Soviet era, many *dachniki* continued to insist that their plots were primarily a survival strategy, even though hard-nosed economists pointed out that they could have obtained their potatoes and tomatoes more cheaply at the market. The breakneck rural–urban migration of Russia's twentieth century has left many traces and imposed many costs, and the *dacha* has proved an excellent way for modern Russians to finesse the rural–urban divide: to engage in more or less refined recreation or to demonstrate their enduring connection to the soil, as circumstances dictate. It has also provided a genuine protection against the uncertainties of Russian life: urban housing has always been scarce, apartments are usually tiny, and Soviet people exercised very little control over their immediate urban environment. The *dacha* (or garden plot) was, by contrast, a patch of land that was their very own (even if it was often only 'theirs' at the discretion of the cooperative). And the community of the dacha settlement – its open-air visibility and legibility – made for a striking contrast with the closed-doors anomie of the typical post-Stalin apartment block: the dirt tracks and fences of *dacha* settlements evidently did more to engage the Soviet spirit of collectivism than the (usually urine-soaked and graffiti-ridden) stairwells of apartment blocks back in the city.

Informal welfare

5.9 ***Pabirčiti*** (or *pabirčenje*) (Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Jovana Dikovic
University of Zurich, Switzerland

Pabirčiti is a verbal form in the Serbian and Croatian languages that refers to the collection of grains that are left over in the field after harvest. Etymologically, the verb derives from the noun *pabirak*, which means the

'remains' in fields, vineyards and orchards after the harvest. In a broader context this noun may refer to the remains of food, the remains of wood after cutting, or small pieces of a bigger whole. The use of these terms is widespread in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are similar sounding words in Slavic languages. The Russian verb *pobirat'sya* is associated with begging for remains of food. The English term 'gleaning', French *glanage*, and German *nachlese*, all have the same meaning – gathering activity after the harvest or an informal 'second harvest'. This practice exists in many other European languages, although in varying forms and degrees. The practice was depicted in one of the better known paintings of Jean-Francois Millet (1814–75), a French painter in the tradition of realism and naturalism. Currently in the Museum d'Orsay, *The Gleaners* (*Des glaneuses*) (1857) depicts three poor women picking up leftover grain in a field (see Figure 5.9.1).

The practice of gleaning in general is linked to the centuries-old custom embedded in common law, whereby the master of the land has the right to allow the poor to follow reapers in the field to gather and glean fallen grains for their own needs. One of the earliest Hebrew agricultural

Figure 5.9.1 *The Gleaners* by Jean-Francois Millet, 1857.
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=20111149.

laws, described in the Old Testament, illustrates how the generosity of the master determined the amount of gleaned grains (The Story of Ruth 2: 2–23). This early form of welfare for the needy is still present in countries from Syria to the USA. The old custom involves a relationship between the landowner and the poor that is still maintained in some places, while in other places faith-based groups glean and redistribute the leftover crop as part of their religious calling. The practice of gleaning is widespread in rural areas and not constrained to Europe; rather, it reaches out to the areas of Biblical Levant and beyond.

The practice of *pabirčenje* (gleaning) in Serbia spread predominantly in agricultural regions, particularly in the province of Vojvodina (Pavković 2009). Part of the current territory of Serbia used to belong to Ottoman Empire, and part to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, so the prevalence of the feudal mode of production, or 'tribute mode of production' (Wolf 1982), lasted longer than in other parts of Europe. The end of feudal relationships came as late as the first agrarian reform (1919–41) in an independent Kingdom of Serbs Croats and Slovenes, where small private holdings started to emerge. Until the first agrarian reform, for the landless, gleaning was often the only way to evade starvation. The poor could not, however, enter the fields without the consent of the landowner. The explicit or implicit, socially and culturally, communicated consent was fundamental for the practice of *pabirčenje* (Pavkovic 2014, 284–96).

There were at least two reasons for landowners' explicit consent and generosity: sociability and instrumentality. On the one hand, generosity was meant to build the landowner's reputation in the community, to extend and to strengthen his social network by providing favours or protection to his subordinates. In this way, *pabirčenje* was a way to sustain and support his clientelist network that could potentially become instrumental in support of his political ambitions, local leadership, etc. On the other hand, there was even more pragmatism in *pabirčenje*. By allowing the poor to glean on his field in the short run, the landowner prevented the potential social unrest and acquired stable political support among the local population in the long run. As Foster points out, in traditional communities all social interaction is based on well-recognised norms of exchange and reciprocity (Foster 1973: 105). Similarly, Wolf ascertains that various redistribution practices in traditional communities may not be as altruistic as they appear at first glance, because they were often socially forced, and moreover they resulted from social and class stratification (Wolf 1982: 98).

After the first agrarian reform and subsequent changes in agriculture and state provision of welfare, perceptions of *pabirčenje* changed

significantly due to several factors. In socialist Yugoslavia (1944–91), the category of landless people officially disappeared due to the parallel existence of three types of property: collective, state and private. In the same period, the state took over the role of welfare provision. Under socialism, reliance on the state for the provision of welfare rather than private patrons changed perceptions and practices of *pabirčenje*. It can be argued that state welfare and maintaining of private property in land (though limited to 10 ha in the socialist period) are fundamental factors that contributed to diminishing significance of *pabirčenje*. This continued following liberal-democratic reforms in the post-socialist period (from 1991) when private owners were granted the right to enlarge their property without any restrictions, unlike socialist times, while the state still remained the main provider of the welfare.

Since the 1990s onwards, due to the civil war in former Yugoslavia (1991–5), and during the political and economic transition of Serbia after 2000, poverty and criminality have risen in cities and villages respectively. Given the fact that Roma belong to the most vulnerable groups in villages because they are unemployed, uneducated and mostly landless, they are often related to criminality, partly due to these factors and partly due to their traditional stereotype of being 'free riders'. These unfavourable circumstances have influenced the fact that Roma are seen as trespassers, while the contemporary use of the term *pabirčenje* mostly represents a euphemism for the field theft.

The previous semantic connotations of *pabirčenje* – that included relations of social, economic and political reciprocity, plus the landowner's consent (which was the main condition activating the right to glean) – have been almost lost today. This is due, first, to the growth of private property and a significant decrease in the number of landless people. Second, the growing importance of state welfare created a general perception that the needy are the responsibility of the state and its social institutions. In such an environment landowners have neither a social nor a political stimulus to support persons in need. Correspondingly, landowner consent to *pabirčenje* is steadily vanishing.

On the other side, would-be gleaners (*pabirčari*) are well aware that their activity is potentially theft. This is not to say that every case of *pabirčenje* is theft, but sometimes it crosses over into stealing from unharvested fields. The *pabirčari* justify their actions by referring to the old meaning of socially embedded practice of *pabirčenje* in order to avoid social criticism and potential sanctions. The authorities display a similarly ambivalent attitude: on the one hand, the state is committed to prosecuting cases of theft, but on the other hand, the police tend to

be very tolerant towards alleged *pabirčari* – a de facto form of institutional patronage over socially vulnerable groups. Such a fluid situation can aggravate tensions between agricultural producers and state institutions such as the police and the courts, resulting in farmers' distrust of the state.

In this modern context, contemporary practices of *pabirčenje* have lost their main driver, the bonds of reciprocity. It became a self-serving practice with little social purpose, aggressive rather than consensual, and satisfying short-term needs rather than long-term relationships. In other words, *pabirčenje* has drifted away from being an informal norm in the past, with socially shared unwritten rules, that were created, communicated and enforced outside of official state and public channels (Helmke and Levitsky 2004), to a substantively different type of informal behaviour. Contemporary *pabirčenje* has become an informal strategy of individuals without land or regular income, who view it as socially justifiable in the absence of other types of access to means of survival.

Such tendencies are closely linked to the formalisation of welfare institutions. From the beginning of the twentieth century, and particularly in the former socialist societies, the state established a monopoly over welfare provision (see Palmer 2012). As a result, forms of informal welfare such as *pabirčenje*, based not merely on charity but also on mutual supportive mechanisms for the interested parties (the landowner and the poor), have been 'crowded out' by the state provision of welfare. Correspondingly, practices of *pabirčenje* that remain have lost their give-and-take embeddedness in the local community, and gained an aspect of parasitism. The role of self-regulating informal forms of organisation has diminished, thus leaving it to the state to penalise, or to overlook, practices of *pabirčenje*.

5.10 ***Skipping*** (general)

Giovanna Capponi
University of Roehampton, UK

In English, the term 'skipping' refers to the action of collecting objects or food items from the waste. It is the equivalent of the American term 'dumpster diving', and both expressions are now widely used in the media and in the press. The term comes from 'skip', which defines the bins themselves, generally large open-topped waste containers, but the term also refers to the items that can be found within them.

'Skipping' as an urban foraging technique is a widespread practice in the context of squatting (the act of unlawfully occupying property or

land, see 5.1 in this volume) and as part of radical political movements. Just like squatting, 'skipping' can be defined as a polysemic practice (Pruijt 2004) as it can acquire different functions and meanings. It can be practised as a provisioning strategy in the contexts of marginality, but also exists as a critical commentary on the enormous waste and the poor distribution of resources in both housing and in social support in a capitalist economic system. This provisioning practice therefore does not necessarily emerge as a direct product of violence, marginality and survival strategies, but is often part of a whole movement of resistance, supported and informed by literature, culture and ideology. It is also related to other movements that advocate consumption consciousness, such as 'freeganism', the practice of reclaiming food thrown out by shops, anti-consumerism and environmentalism.

'Skipping' is normally performed by a heterogeneous group of peoples, including the homeless, squatters, political and environmental activists, social anarchists, artists and students with limited income (see Figure 5.10.1). 'Skipping' is rarely carried out as an individual practice, but often performed within an organised community of people sharing resources, especially in the context of big cities. In fact, these types of reclaimed resources are abundant in urban areas, as a result of a socio-economic model in which the increasing demand for goods leads to the constant production of commodities and their continuous replacement (Bauman 2004).

As different items are collected in different spots, these urban foragers re-map the city according to the potential items that can be found: furniture, mattresses, appliances and clothes may be collected in residential areas, while shops, local markets and supermarkets in the main streets provide a constant and regular supply of food items. Supermarkets are obliged on a daily basis to get rid of food, which according to the product labelling is reaching its optimum consumption date and ignores the actual status of the commodity itself. In other cases, items are thrown away because the packaging is broken or damaged. The same happens in local markets, where fresh vegetables and fruits with small imperfections or slight signs of decay are discarded (Black 2007).

As a rule, communities that practise 'skipping' as a provisioning strategy develop certain routine habits regarding their favourite spots. Usually a further consideration is to scavenge in bins that provide the widest variety of wasted goods. For example, for daily provisioning, a supermarket or a grocery store bin will be favoured over the waste bin of a Japanese take away. These parameters of choice reflect personal tastes and needs, reproducing a standard comparison between costs and benefits (Narotzky 2007). The goods that have been reclaimed from the

Figure 5.10.1 Skipping does not require specific tools: people normally wear washable gloves and coats and use plastic bags or old backpacks to carry the items they find in the bins.
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garbage are usually brought into the community (be it a squat, a social centre or a shared habitation), to be redistributed and consumed.

Both official and informal social centres, community centres and non-profit associations employ a variety of different strategies to redistribute the resources that have been discarded from the mainstream economic system. One of these strategies is the establishment of a 'free shop' – an anti-consumerism area where items like second-hand clothes,

bags and shoes can be left or taken for free. 'Free shops' are commonly present inside squats and social centres, where dwellers, friends and visitors can acquire objects they like or need, but also leave items they do not use anymore, making them available to others.

In a similar vein, a popular way of redistributing soon to be date expired or unsold food is through what is known as the 'People's Kitchen'. Activists and volunteers reclaim edible goods from the skip or from the shops, then cook it and share it in a communal meal for free, often inviting disadvantaged people, friends and fellow activists to join them. Such events can be seen as collective performances of social critique and often provide an occasion to discuss related political issues.

While structured non-profit organisations prefer to negotiate with and reclaim food directly from the shops, squats and occupied social centres use 'skipping' as their predominant way of provisioning. 'Dumpster diving' is not a socially accepted behaviour and foragers risk incurring criminal charges for theft (applicable when the bin is technically owned by someone else) or trespass (applicable when a bin is located on private property). The prevailing social attitude towards garbage is that it represents objects of no value, thus cases of criminal prosecution relating to 'skipping' are rare. However, several companies have taken action to prevent their garbage being taken by locking their bins or surrounding them with secure fencing.

It should be noted that on a political level, the semi-legal status of 'skipping' makes the practice difficult to measure, but its high visibility reinforces its value as a protest action. Re-appropriating something that has been expelled from the production/distribution chain represents a reconfiguration of consumption choices, but also redefines what is considered 'clean', 'edible' and 'desirable'. Reclaiming useful goods from the garbage not only aims at denouncing the amount of wasted resources in the neoliberal world, but it also implies the creation of alternative values and criteria of consumption (Clark 2004).

5.11 ***Caffè sospeso*** (Italy)

Paolo Mancini
University of Perugia, Italy

Why do many Neapolitans (*napoletani*) enter a bar and ask '*C'è un caffè sospeso?*' ('Is there a suspended coffee?') Those who ask this question know that an old tradition exists in Naples whereby a customer who has had a coffee in a bar elects to pay for two cups of coffee instead of one, thereby leaving a free coffee for an unidentified future customer.